WORK, PRISON, WORK

for a struggle against the prison world

At a time when suicides at work are making headlines and deaths in prison are being reported with morbid regularity, every attempt to respond to these events shares one thing in common: they lead us astray. We're constantly bombarded with talk of "personal tragedies," "administrative errors," "preventative surveillance," "individualized solutions," "stress management," etc. Yet everyone remains silent about the main problem, the exploitation of wage labor and imprisonment, the two foundations of the capitalist system.

It's impossible to challenge imprisonment without challenging the society that produces it. Prison is not a separate world; it doesn't just affect prisoners and their loved ones alone. Prison fulfills the function of social control and regulation of the poor necessary to maintain social peace. The perpetual threat of prison ensures that the exploited will acquiesce to a life of wage labor. Everyone knows, too, that incarceration serves as an additional stigma: you're not just exploited, you're a convict. Prison harms its victims well beyond their time behind bars (the stain of a criminal record is just one example) but it also serves to create divisions among the exploited between those who have been "reformed" and those who are branded as "deviants" and "delinquents." Yet everyone, as long as they're poor, is a potential prison-er, since the system that delivers the sentence is a class-based justice system. The law isn't neutral. Nor is it the natural expression of public interest. The law is the concrete manifestation of the balance of class power at a given moment in history. The only purpose of the law is to protect the property and security of the dominant class. The law doesn't punish actions, it criminalizes existence itself, the fact of belonging to a "dangerous class" (undocumented immigrants, "gang" members, youth in a highly policed neighborhood, etc.).

To fight against prison means to fight against the state and its justice system. This is why any form of "humanitarian" discourse whose horizon extends only so far as better prison conditions and respect for prisoners' rights will ultimately only contribute to expanding imprisonment and perpetuating the prison system. In each new prison, for instance, the only reason why individual cells have their own showers is because the prison administration wants to reduce the movement of prisoners and further separate and isolate them from each other. The very architecture of these new prisons (small cell blocks, video surveillance everywhere, restricted movement) optimizes control over prisoners with the express aim of preventing and repressing the possibility of revolt.

In just the same way, what are often proposed as alternatives to prison (electronic ankle monitors and other forms of judicial control) in reality only extend the state's control over certain populations. These mechanisms of judicial control are accompanied by forms of social control that often amount to forced labor, following a similar logic to how the state manages unemployed people, where the slightest misstep is punished. These so-called alternatives, like many other forms of social control, foremost among which is wage labor, are internalized by the oppressed as the means of self-discipline necessary to force complacency and obedience. These reforms, presented as a way of reducing over-crowded prison populations, on the contrary are leading to more and more people being locked up, as the number of prisoners doesn't cease to rise.

Since prison is the image of society, the weakness of current struggles in and around prisons is a reflection of the weakness of class antagonisms throughout all of society. Yet there are struggles today against imprisonment, for example the struggles against new detention centers in Italy and France or new prisons in Belgium, that have made it possible to forge real connections between the inside and the outside of prisons and to expand the horizon of recent prison revolts within the larger struggle against the capitalist system…

…since freedom isn't an individual condition but a social relation we must build in constant struggle.

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